

## Project Reflections from Spain

The two university professors representing the Project's Spanish team<sup>1</sup> are both members of the Faculty of the Educational Sciences at the University of A Coruña (UDC) located in Galicia, one of the 17 'Autonomous Communities' of Spain — each Community operating its own public education system. Collaborating with researchers from five other European countries<sup>2</sup> has facilitated the construction of an international research team on child-centred pedagogy whose socio-cultural and linguistic diversity has allowed Project partners to put into cross-cultural perspective the many ways in which child-centred pedagogy has been (and can be) understood and practiced in order to promote learning in the early years while defending and protecting children's rights. The fact that the Project traverses various socioeconomic, political and cultural terrains, reflecting different epistemological influences on educational practices within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), has also meant that Project members have benefitted from an otherwise rare opportunity to learn from the particularities of each country as they relate to educational conceptions and practices in ECEC. In this way, the collaborative research emerging from this Project has helped generate resources to empower educational practice in the early years, building on pedagogical actions that combine quality education with children's diverse perspectives, needs and individual uniqueness, as well as those of their educators.

In the process, a few challenges emerged from the socioeconomic and linguistic circumstances of the Galician region of Spain. On the one hand, Galicia is an economically vulnerable Community due to the fact that nearly 26% of Galician children live in poverty,<sup>3</sup> its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita falling well below the European Union average.<sup>4</sup> What is more, 60% of Galician inhabitants reside in low- or intermediate-density population areas,<sup>5</sup> although the ongoing urbanisation of the population has greatly intensified over the last decade.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, two official languages serve as vehicles for learning in the Galician education system: Galician and Spanish, and, more recently, so does English in some schools.<sup>7</sup> This rather complex socio-cultural landscape required that special care be

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<sup>1</sup> Concepción Sánchez Blanco (Coordinator) and Cathryn Teasley.

<sup>2</sup> The participating countries include: Croatia, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> See Piñeiro, J. (2019, 25 April). 'Se sitúa en un 26 % la tasa de pobreza infantil en Galicia'. *El Correo Gallego*. Accessed from: <https://www.elcorreo gallego.es/galicia/ecg/situa-un-26-tasa-pobreza-infantil-galicia/idEdicion-2019-04-25/idNoticia-1179232>.

<sup>4</sup> Galicia's GDP reaches 83% of the EU's 100% average, while Madrid's reaches 95%. See Eurostat (2015, 21 May). 'GDP per capita in the EU in 2013: Seven capital regions among the ten most prosperous'. *Eurostat News Release*. Accessed from: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/6839731/1-21052015-AP-EN.pdf/c3f5f43b-397c-40fd-a0a4-7e68e3bea8cd>.

<sup>5</sup> See IGE–Instituto Galego de Estatística (2016). 'Mapa dos Concellos de Galicia Segundo o Grao de Urbanización (GU 2016)'. Accessed from: <https://www.ige.eu/estatico/estat.jsp?ruta=html/gl/rural-urbano/MapaConcellosGrao2016.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> See Moledo, A. (2018, 19 February). Más del 70% de la población gallega se concentra en la quinta parte del territorio. *La Opinión A Coruña*. Accessed from: <https://www.laopinioncoruna.es/galicia/2018/02/19/70-poblacion-gallega-concentra-quinta/1264682.html>.

<sup>7</sup> The 'Instruction for the Application of Decree 79/2010, of May 20, for Plurilingualism in Non-University Education in Galicia Following the Pronouncements of the Judgements of the Superior

taken when presenting the Project's objectives to education authorities and school-based educators, or when implementing data-gathering techniques and interpreting the data, as the research team were fully aware of these linguistic circumstances and of the fact that public investment in education in the Spanish State had suffered a substantial setback following the global economic crisis of 2008.<sup>8</sup>

It also meant that additional time and resources were needed for translation purposes given that English, as the *lingua franca* of this Project, is less familiar in Spain in general than it is in other countries, considering the prominence of Spanish throughout the world. What is more, translating the Project's productions into other languages in addition to Spanish or Galician brings to the fore Europe's rich linguistic tapestry beyond English, its predominant official language. And in a cultural and educational context as linguistically diverse and fragile as Galicia's,<sup>9</sup> political and institutional support and resources for translation needs derived from international projects such as this one would help protect Galician speakers young and old as linguistic minorities, while providing an excellent means of promoting Europe's linguistic diversity internationally.

As with all Project partners, the University of A Coruña team participated in all seven stages of the Project's development.<sup>10</sup> Providing an exhaustive review of the literature on child-centred practice, or on the state of ECEC in general in Spain (stage 1), proved challenging in that recent empirical research in these areas of the Spanish education system (as developed by each Autonomous Community and/or as a whole) is either scarce or not systematically addressed. As for stage 2, obtaining the cooperation of education authorities and school staff in order to conduct observations in their ECEC networks, schools and classrooms constituted our second and most extraordinary challenge in the initial stages of the Project. Recruiting educators was a painstaking process, involving many meetings with Education officials systemwide throughout the first year, as well as repeated visits to each of the five participating schools with their respective collaborating educators. Once access was finally granted, the case-studies required meticulous documentation through exhaustive field notes, photographs and audio-visual recordings. This was no minor task considering

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Court of Justice of Galicia on this Matter' (translated from the Galician: *Instrucción para a aplicación do Decreto 79/2010, do 20 de maio, para o plurilingüismo no ensino non universitario de Galicia, tras os pronunciamentos das sentenzas do Tribunal Superior de Xustiza de Galicia sobre este*) requires that schools '[g]uarantee the presence of the two official languages [in reference to Galician and Spanish] as vehicles in the annual programming of the centre and, therefore, the acquisition of knowledge in both languages' (Instruction 1c). The role of English is also addressed in this Instruction and in the Decree it is based on.

<sup>8</sup> Educator/pupil ratios were increased, among other changes, following the application of 'Royal Decree-Law 14/2012, of 20 April, on Urgent Measures to Rationalise Public Spending in the Education Sector' (translated from the Spanish: *Real Decreto-Ley 14/2012, de 20 de abril, de medidas urgentes de racionalización del gasto público en el ámbito educativo*).

<sup>9</sup> 'The Galician Language is Fading Out Early, in Early Childhood Education.' Translated from: Castro, C. (2018, 27 September). 'O galego esmorece xa na educación infantil'. *La Voz de Galicia*. Accessed from: [https://www.lavozdeg Galicia.es/noticia/educacion/2018/09/27/span-langgl-galego-esmorece-xa-na-educacion-infantilspan/0003\\_201809H27P40994.htm](https://www.lavozdeg Galicia.es/noticia/educacion/2018/09/27/span-langgl-galego-esmorece-xa-na-educacion-infantilspan/0003_201809H27P40994.htm).

<sup>10</sup> The stages included the following intellectual outputs: (1) a literature and institutional review of child-centred practice in ECEC; (2) a quantitative analysis (in the form of a report) and a qualitative analysis (through case studies) of local and transnational training needs in this area of research and practice; (3) an online survey pertaining to local needs; (4) the development of three online training courses made available in English, Spanish and Italian; (5) the local piloting of those courses; (6) the quantitative and qualitative evaluation of that training and its impact on practice; and (7) the publication of an electronic book on child-centred practice.

that conducting empirical research implies applying the legal code of ethics pertaining to the protection of human subjects, not least of which are the rights and identities of minors. Obtaining parental permissions was essential, then, at every turn in the data collection process.

Such efforts proved decisive, even crucial, not only for gaining access to daily life in ECEC settings in Galicia, but also for developing all subsequent stages of the Project in our local context. By carrying out the initial and constant ‘footwork’ of establishing inter-institutional ties, we were able to observe many children and various educators in action, gathering data rich in pedagogical detail from the five schools, thus covering both ‘cycles’ of ECEC (for 0-3-year-olds and for 3-6-year-olds). In fact, some highly creative support for our research came directly from a group of children through their art, when they and their educator responded to our coordinator’s request that the children themselves design and propose different logotypes for the international Project, a task they gladly accepted! We further recruited numerous educators interested in responding to the survey on training needs, many of whom also enrolled in and evaluated the online courses (stages 5 and 6), and have also shown interest in reading the publications resulting from our research. One particularly participatory educator offered an additional assessment of the online courses via a podcast for the e-book (stage 7).

As regards the survey (stage 3), our efforts to access the target population — ECEC educators in Galicia — yielded results that exceeded all expectations, as nearly 500 educators responded. We attribute much of that success to our team coordinator’s tireless recruitment strategies carried out in stages 1 and 2. Although many of the responding educators were satisfied with their professional knowledge and practice, a clear majority felt the need for many more opportunities for professional development in child-centred practice and training within the ECEC sector in general.

As for the online courses (stages 4, 5 and 6), the Spanish/Galician team was primarily responsible for developing one of three courses, the course on “The Power of Stories” for fostering child-centred practice. Prior research conducted by the team’s coordinator served as a primary springboard for designing the conceptual framework for the stories course, namely her books *Infancias Nómadas* (Sánchez-Blanco, 2013) and *Fuego, Meteoritos y Elefantes* (Sánchez-Blanco, 2018), among other writings. The activities and reflections associated with the various story genres proposed in this course were designed to advance child-centred teaching practice by incorporating an essential component: that of conceiving childhood as diverse in characteristics and origins. Hence, in the course, childhoods were referred to in the plural (James & Prout, 2015), with an understanding that all children are not only entitled to the same rights, but are also in the process of acquiring shared responsibilities, for education and care have become intertwined, this making education first and foremost a form of care (Gopnik, 2016; Sánchez-Blanco, 2018). And while we struggled to tailor the course content to a limited timeframe for busy educators, the majority of those who took the course found it very effective because the content encouraged them to reflect on their practice and value the children’s own particular narratives and perspectives.

Overall, the Galician/Spanish team’s participation in this Project has ‘translated’ into an invaluable and gratifying process of personal and professional growth. Perhaps the most difficult part of this intense and informative process of collaboration and empirical enquiry has been narrowing down our scope and selecting a manageable handful of aspects from the wealth of information collected. In any case, and as our colleagues from Plymouth have rightly pointed out, it would be a

shame not to make full use of the data, which we indeed intend to do through future publications.

It is our hope that our democratic approach to ECEC has enriched the discourse and practice around child-centred pedagogy in general. We also hope that those ECEC educators who selflessly offered their time and professional space to our research have found it equally worthwhile. Our gratitude further extends to the children themselves, to their families, and to all institutional actors without whose help this research would not have been possible.

## References

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